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Beleaguered City, Beleaguered Planet

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Abstract

This article sets out to analyze the connections between three different but related phenomena (capitalist globalization, the Anthropocene, and the coronavirus epidemic) through the lens of iconic buildings and spaces and the cities in which they are mostly found. I argue that the transnational capitalist class uses cities as competitors in a global system of lucrative investment opportunities. Capitalist globalization is widely implicated in the Anthropocene (signifying human impacts on the Earth system, usually destructive) and together they facilitate the spread of the coronavirus. The concept of "administrative evil" is mobilized to highlight the ethical dimensions of city planning, and the increasingly "beleaguered city."

Keywords

anthropocene – capitalism – coronavirus – globalization – transnational capitalist class

1 Introduction: Beleaguered City

> I have read, in some old, marvellous tale,
> Some legend strange and vague,
> That a midnight host of spectres pale
> Beleaguered the walls of Prague.

Although the first stanza of Longfellow's (1839) poem is alarming, it has a happy ending. The ending of our beleaguered cities almost two hundred years later, is far from certain. I will argue that the triple crises of capitalist globalization

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driven by a transnational capitalist class (TCC), the Anthropocene, and the coronavirus combine to make our cities beleaguered, with no end in sight. The available evidence suggests that radical system change requires exit from both capitalism (a system that is unimaginable without dangerous greenhouse gas emissions) and an exit from the contemporary hierarchic system of states whose existence is unimaginable without the tax revenues provided directly or indirectly via CO2 emissions. The context in which this argument is developed is the city, particularly the megacity form (ten-million-plus inhabitants) that began after the end of the Second World War, mostly but not exclusively in Asia. Within cities the focus is on iconic architecture, both historical and contemporary, an increasingly influential part of the capitalist city, global tourism, and local and national place-branding. Capitalist globalization enormously increased and accelerated inter-national flows of people and goods across the planet. Cities, the Anthropocene, and plagues all have their own histories. When these histories collide, as they are doing today, actual and potential catastrophic effects are highlighted and reported from many places, notably big cities, particularly what I have labeled "consumerist/oppressive cities" (Sklair 2009) – thus the 'Beleaguered City' of my title.

2 Urban Studies and the Environment

Urban studies as an academic and a professional enterprise until quite recently has tended to take notice of the environment in the context of air pollution, the housing problem, transportation, and other consequences of high-density living. As a non-specialist in urban planning, I can do no better than to reference two books by Peter Hall, the first an updated edition of his 1996 classic *Cities of Tomorrow* in which he declares: "at the end of nearly a century of modern planning, the problem of cities remained much as they had been at the start" (p. 421). I am not in a position to say if this is true (Hall himself shows the importance of the rise of the automobile culture), but the blurb from the American Planning Association on *Cities of Tomorrow*, "This is the one book you have to read," suggests that the APA considers Hall's contribution as uniquely significant, and this may be more important than whether or not it actually is true.

In 1998, Hall co-authored a very different book with the "everyday" anarchist Colin Ward (Goodway 2006:Chapter 14). Hall and Ward's book was a celebration of the centenary of the Town and Country Planning Association in the UK and, in particular, the publication of Ebenezer Howard's *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* republished as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1902, "destined to become the most influential and important book in the entire history of twentieth-century city planning" (Hall and Ward 1998: Preface). A notable difference between these two books is that in the first, there is a brief mention of "sustainable urban development" in which Hall comments, "The problem was that though everyone was in favour of it, nobody knew exactly what it meant" (Hall 1996:412), while in *Sociable Cities* aspects of sustainable urban development take up most of the second half of the book (Hall and Ward 1998: Part II).

The change of emphasis between these two books, and particularly the privileging of "the quest for sustainability" and the politics that underpin it, clearly open up novel environmental dimensions of urban planning. Hall and Ward were by no means alone. Keil (2005) presents a review of work on "urban political ecology" which, while not discussing Peter Hall or architecture, does contain an eerily prescient reflection on cities and pandemics (p. 644). In the early twentieth century there is little mention of iconic architecture (unique or typical), but as the twenty-first century gathered pace, critiques and celebrations of what we now know as the capitalist city (characterized by city branding, city boosterism, mass international tourism based on cheap flights, 'best city' rankings on a variety of criteria) began to appear. In this sense, iconic buildings and spaces provide a lens through which we can start to explain how different fractions of the transnational capitalist class mobilize cities and their icons as competitors in a global system of lucrative investment opportunities (Derudder et al. 2012; Knox 2011; Sklair 2017). Several major carbon-emitting industries – construction, transportation, industrial food production, and print media advertising – are implicated in what makes the capitalist city so successful in terms of the goals of capitalist globalization, and so problematic in terms of ecological sustainability.

Paradoxically, alongside affordability, leisure, amenities, and employment opportunities, the idea of the sustainable city nestled beside the growing interest in 'the environment' in the new millennium. One example neatly summarizes the complexity of this topic. In 2011, Elsevier began to publish a new journal, *Sustainable Cities and Society*. It got off to a rather contradictory start on its very first page: "According to a United Nations report, cities cover only 2% of the world's land surface, yet consume 75% of the world's natural resources and produce 75% of its waste … Cities increase energy efficiency, consume fewer resources, produce less pollution and avoid urban sprawl. Future cities must be developed or adapted to meet the emerging needs of its citizens." These contradictory sentiments reappear in much of the literature on cities, proclaiming them as either opportunity-rich sites or as toxic spaces of the Anthropocene, sometimes both, though the media tend to portray the Anthropocene in neutral terms (Sklair 2021). In my own early work on iconic architecture and cities the focus was on issues of class polarization, consumerism, and ecological unsustainability, the latter rather vaguely defined. A new, sharper, focus was necessary.

3 The Anthropocene City

In 2016, the Canadian eco-socialist Ian Angus, who edits the online journal *Climate & Capitalism* (subtitled "Ecosocialism or barbarism: There is no third way") published "Facing the Anthropocene." This convinced me that I had been missing something very important about the city in capitalist society, namely that to begin to fully understand cities in the twenty-first century we have to visualize and conceptualize them in the context of the contentious concept of the Anthropocene, simply defined as the human impact, usually destructive, on the Earth system. John Bellamy Foster's pioneering research on the metabolic rift, based on Marx's understanding of the work of the German agricultural chemist Liebig, explains the link between cities and the Anthropocene (Foster and Burkett 2016: esp. Chapter 3).

Marx writes:

> Capitalist production, by collecting the population in great centres, and causing an ever-increasing preponderance of town population, on the one hand concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the circulation of matter between man [sic] and the soil, i.e., prevents the return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it therefore violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil. By this action it destroys at the same time the health of the town laborer and the intellectual life of the rural laborer. … The more a country starts its development on the foundation of modern industry, like the United States, for example, the more rapid is this process of destruction (Marx 1961 [1887]:505–506).

However, neither Angus nor Foster engages with Michael Pollan's incisive critique of Liebig's role in the creation of "Big Organic" via the NPK (chemical fertilizer) mentality (Pollan 2006: Chapter 9). Like capitalism, cities have usually been seen (and theorized) as social and material structures often in process of change. Similarly, like the common perception of capitalism (as in "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism"), in the modern period conceptions of cities have usually portrayed them as indestructible. Even when they have been destroyed they have mostly been rebuilt.

Think in Europe alone of Lisbon in 1755, London in the Blitz, Berlin, Dresden, Sarajevo, to name but a few, what Bevan (2006) conceptualizes as the history of "urbicide."

4 Provisional Cities

In her 2018 path-breaking book, *Provisional Cities: Cautionary Tales for the Anthropocene*, the architecture scholar and artist Renata Tyszczuk offers a powerful warning that, in the Anthropocene, cities might cease to be indestructible, indeed they become "provisional." Anticipating this idea, two of the most influential urbanists of the twentieth century, Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes, believed that cities "were among the most fragile of organisms" (quoted in Wojtowicz 1998:136). Tyszczuk imagines and invents two new words:

> Anthropocenophobia, a fear of, or anxiety about, the Anthropocene, the new epoch of human making; also harboring a fear of the excessive deliberations about either human epochal prowess, or human frailty, and geological epoch of the last 11,700 years, often associated with a nostalgia for clement, warm and relatively stable times.

Tyszczuk expands with a similarly imaginary:

> She found that the frequent references to a new epoch brokered by a novel sense of human calamity and talk of an 'apocalypse that was already here and now' induced in her a kind of Anthropocenophobia. She was aware of an unfolding global catastrophe – who wasn't? She didn't care what it was called, whether it was a good or a bad Anthropocene, whether it was about saving business-as-usual or this-changes everything. She simply found it frightening: fear of human hubris, fear of human vulnerability; fear, in fact, that in spite of all the epochal talk, nothing would make a difference. The sky would just keep on falling (Tyszczuk 2018:viii).

The "provisional cities" of Tyszczuk's title is explained, simply, as follows:

> Geological time frames may remind us that all human settlement is provisional, but global urban practices and contemporary geopolitics continue to show little recognition of the precarious interdependence of human and non-human worlds, their radical instability, their capacity to surprise. If the Anthropocene is showing us that everything – even our most enduring symbols of mastery and permanence, from the dome

> of the Capitol Building [pre-6 January 2021!] to the temples of Angkor Wat – is actually provisional, how can stories about settlement and unsettlement help us to meet and to cope with this new ontological and philosophical crisis (Ibid:2)?

Tyszczuk is careful to tell us that this is “not to denounce cities, but to recognize that the history of cities – in all their incarnations: garden cities, ecocities, sustainable cities, resilient cities, smart cities, and so on – sees one grand narrative replacing the next, and that ultimately they are all provisional” (Ibid). Provisional cities come in various forms of “unsettlements,” from tent cities to megalopolises. With a striking rhetorical flourish, Tyszczuk declares: “megacities are the giant technofossil assemblages of the future” (Ibid:37), they are all Anthropocene stories. It seems not accidental that the two examples above (the Capitol Building and Angkor Wat) are themselves architectural icons.

Cities that look and feel so solid are, therefore, temporary from the two perspectives of Anthropocene time: the anthropogenic ruins of the past, and the ruins of the present (for those unfortunate enough to live near especially vulnerable places), and the ruins of the future as portrayed in a science fiction archive that seems to creep closer to science fact year by year. We live “the fiction of a settled life” (Ibid:8), what Casagrande et al. (2017) identify as a state of “ecomyopia.” Now that more than half of the world’s population lives in cities (over 30 of which have more than ten million inhabitants), it seems obvious that what has come to be known as mega-urbanization raises several important issues. In his review of the topic, Lauermann (2018) argues:

> Mega urbanization is not only the purview of wealthy global cities or ambitious developmental states. Rather, it is an increasingly common phenomenon across cities of many sizes and geographies. As mega projects transform everyday urban life, the definition of ‘everyday’ and ‘ordinary’ increasingly includes mega urban processes (p. 2).

Neil Brenner (2013) and his colleagues expand this into the provocative idea of “Planetary Urbanization,” a concept that inspired some of my own later research on “terraforming” (Sklair forthcoming).

5 Gentrification and Displacement

As with the Earth’s eco-systems, cities in the process of radical change are not impacted equally. Some communities are certainly beleaguered, others are privileged. Therefore, we need to ask: is the sprawling modern city a viable space for what the Chinese government appears to have (with baffling logic) enshrined in law as "ecological civilization" (see Marinelli 2018)? Globalizing capitalist ideologues have been posing this question for decades and their answer "greening the city" encapsulates a popular movement for urban boosters everywhere. Even the most responsible, progressive architecture and urban planning professionals are finding it difficult to avoid the "greening to box-ticking greenwashing" transition (Sklair 2017:220–223). This has led to a boom in the numbers of so-called ecocities to be found all over the world, including many in very unlikely places (Joss et al. 2013). Knox (2011:243–250) and Halliday (2019) offer more hopeful perspectives than I can offer here.

Iconic architecture re-enters the story of beleaguered cities in an unlikely pairing with "slum clearance" via the concepts of "Planetary Gentrification," "Slum Gentrification," and "Mega-gentrification and displacement" in Lees et al. (2016) who acknowledge issues around definitions of slums (see Angotti 2006), gentrification, and displacement, providing many telling case studies, some addressing resistance to planetary gentrification. The argument, in a nutshell, is that neoliberal globalization stimulates gentrification which, almost inevitably, results in the often highly violent displacement of poor minority communities, orchestrated by the national and local states, NGOs, and the corporate sector all over the world. Ghertner (2015) provides an exemplary case study of Delhi. Neil Smith (1982:139–140) made the important theoretical distinctions between "gentrification" and investment-driven "redevelopment" (and revitalization and de-vitalization by gentrification). In my terms, many slums are eventually replaced by iconic buildings, usually typical icons that appear to the untrained eye to resemble buildings whose pictures they have seen on TV, films, print media; or even unique works of art. This suggests, tentatively, a peculiar dialectical relationship between iconic architecture (as re-interpreted by Rem Koolhaas), slums, and class struggles, explored in Rao (2012).

Marshall Berman's (1988) classic assessment of "urban renewal" in New York expresses this peculiar dialectic as it combines a devastating condemnation of the great destructive gentrifier Robert Moses with a layer of anti-hero admiration. Berman comments:

> Many of the city's most impressive structures [all more or less still iconic] were planned specifically as symbolic expressions of modernity: Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Coney Island, Manhattan's many skyscrapers, Rockefeller Center and much else … Robert Moses who is probably the greatest creator of symbolic forms

> in twentieth-century New York, whose constructions had a destructive and disastrous impact on my early life … [his] specter still haunts my city today (shades of Longfellow. (1839) in Berman 1988:289).

This excerpt introduces Berman's "In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York."

Another of Berman's villains is Siegfried Giedion ("Le Corbusier's most articulate disciple"), the author of one of the still most influential texts on architecture and urbanism in the modernist canon, *Space, Time and Architecture*, published in 1941. Giedion, who was a close friend of James Joyce, another distinguished observer of cities, proclaims: "there is no longer any place for the city street, with heavy traffic running between rows of houses; it cannot possibly be permitted to persist" (quoted in Berman 1988:169n). Berman highlights this as an expression of the extreme wing of the modernist anti-city tendency. Giedion also comments on slums in his remarkable post-war book *Mechanization Takes Control*. He argues, in the apparently very different context of Fordist scientific management as it relates to the psychology of the worker, "Here Henry Ford hits on a phenomenon known to every urbanist who has slum-dwellers to resettle: No matter how primitive and unsanitary conditions may be, a certain number will always be found who refuse to leave their slum for new houses, and who prefer by far their old and familiar conditions" (Giedion 1948:125). Giedion, of course, assumes naively that the promise of better new housing is always honored, and ignores the implicit destruction of community. His tone is decidedly amoral. In a strange juxtaposition, this quote from Giedion comes just after two photographs, comparing the mechanization of auto production and of carcasses in a Chicago slaughterhouse (Ibid:122–123). Berman quotes the famous boast of Robert Moses, "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis you have to hack your way with a meat ax [sic]" (Berman 1988:293–294, see also the footnote on p. 308). Hacking cities and meat axes force us to address issues of planning and good and evil in the city, and elsewhere.

6 Administrative Evil and Urban Planning

An exceptionally interesting and original article, "Saving the City: Harland Bartholomew and Administrative Evil in St. Louis" (Benton 2018) provides a window into much neglected moral questions raised by city planning. Benton presents Bartholomew as epitomizing the technical rationality that makes administrative evil possible.

> By using technical-rational planning and focusing on quantitative outcomes, Bartholomew created conditions that detached him from the effects that his planning had on Black neighborhoods. Bartholomew dehumanized Blacks in St. Louis as economic drains. At several points, Bartholomew advocated for racial segregation to preserve neighborhood property values (Ibid:199).

Urban renewal was (and still is) the bureaucratic euphemism for slum clearance (formerly Negro Removal), which in its turn becomes the euphemism for destroying Black and other unwelcome ethnic minority communities. Freund (2015) provides compelling evidence from the US on who benefited from slum clearance and urban renewal, telling similar stories of the destruction of the homes and communities of Black and other ethnic minority groups in order to renew and beautify American cities, usually for the benefit of developers and their somewhat more prosperous clients. For example: "An Engineer Describes the Work Required to Make Seattle Competitive, 1908" (pp. 84–87); "New York City Retailers Organize to Protect a Fifth Avenue Shopping District, 1916" (pp. 87–89); "Herbert Gans Critiques Federal Urban Renewal Programs, 1959" (pp. 236–243). Gans was Denise Scott Brown's mentor (see Scott Brown [2009:22–54] on the architect/planner/sociologist triad). Back to Freund for "Jersey City Markets Itself to a New Demographic, 2003–2006" (pp. 278–281), and finally "A Professor Explains How Urban Redevelopment Has Impacted Los Angeles Minority Communities, 1987/1988" (pp. 281–286). This last piece is by Cynthia Hamilton of the Los Angeles Labor/Community Strategy Center, author of a report "Apartheid in an American City" published as a book by the Center in 2017.

Freund's compendium as a whole is a valuable resource for historical and contemporary research on race and the city in the US (see also the multi-national survey of planners and planning through the lens of urban anthropology in Mack and Herzfeld 2020). It is important to remember that the concept of the "slum" has been highly controversial since at least the nineteenth century (Hall 1996: Chapter 2). On the more contemporary topic of slum tourism, we find Dovey and King (2012) on "the taste for slums," Jones (2012) on "Bankable Slums," McFarlane (2012) on "The Entrepreneurial Slum," Mekawy (2012) on "Responsible Slum Tourism: Egyptian Experience," and Rivadulla and Bocarejo (2014) on "Beautifying the Slum," not forgetting the less exotic Mike Davis (2006) on the planet of slums. This brings us into the realm of "administrative evil."

7 Administrative Evil as a Conceptual Tool

The concept of "administrative evil" was developed by Adams and Balfour (1998) in their book *Unmasking Administrative Evil*. They argue that ordinary people carrying out their normal professional and administrative tasks (characterized by the obsession with "technical rationality") can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are doing anything wrong, sometimes they believe that what they are doing is for the public good, a condition identified as "moral inversion" that usually masks the evil consequences of their actions. This unrecognized potential for administrative evil can, ultimately, escalate to much greater evil. Adams and Balfour illustrate this through case studies derived from the Nazi Holocaust in general and specifically the slave labor camps at Mittelbau-Dora and the V-2 rocket production site at Peenemünde. These were directly connected with the Marshall Space Flight Center in the US, where the Apollo 11 project to take men to the moon began. The team set up by Wernher von Braun (a prominent rocket scientist in Nazi Germany) came to the United States in 1945. Adams and Balfour say:

> We are left with the reality that a handful of America's most competent and successful public managers in the government agency that was lionized in the 1960s as the paradigmatic high-performing organization either had been 'committed Nazis' or had themselves directly engaged in actions for which others in postwar Germany were convicted of war crimes. This story begins at Mittelbau-Dora, where administrative evil wore no mask. … we now find that evil sullying our nation's single greatest technical achievement, the moon landing.

Interesting, but what has this to do with cities and iconic architecture and the beleaguered city? In their chapter on racism in American cities, Adams and Balfour argue that bureaucrats and planners make administrative decisions on slum clearance and urban renewal that destroy communities (often specifically targeting minority communities) as chronicled above.

> [They] explore the contemporary context in which public policy is made and implemented, with a focus on how the tacit assumptions that undergird technical-rational solutions to messy, intractable social problems can unwittingly contribute to the breakdown of community, the creation of "surplus populations," and, through moral inversions, even to "public

> policies of destruction" (Ibid: Chapter 4). [Thus:] little consideration has been given to the notion that the Holocaust is directly relevant to the theory and practice of public administration. This lack of attention to the meaning of the Holocaust for public administration is characteristic of the field's lack of historical consciousness and represents a dangerous gap in the self-understanding of the field, one that contributes to a blindness to the potential for administrative evil and to the fragility of the field's ethical foundations (Ibid: Chapter 1).

The enormous literature on the Eichmann trial in 1961 in Israel and Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" argument (Jones 2015) is of course relevant here as are the essays in Benhabib (2010: Part IV).

It may be contentious to compare many of these apparently extreme statements about evil with scholarly accounts of the difficulties that planners face. For example, Paul Knox (2011) in his most useful book on cities and design, has a chapter on modernist urban planning entitled, significantly, "The City Redesigned: Modernity, Efficiency and Equity" (Chapter 4). Knox does mention slums and urban clearance and argues, "Planning and urban design can be construed as key to the internal survival mechanisms of capitalism, channeling the energy of opposing social forces into the defense of the dominant order, helping to propagate its own goals and values as the legitimate ones" (p. 101) but, like most of us, he does not condemn urban planning as inherently or potentially evil. The forces that make cities beleaguered are mostly invisible to those who do not come into regular contact with them. The coronavirus epidemic has changed this feature of urban life drastically in a way that seems qualitatively different to previous plagues and viruses (see Gandy 2021). A relatively invisible evil in the Anthropocene has been transformed into an actually invisible specter haunting all forms of human settlement, especially cities.

8 The Perfect Storm

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. At that point 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness had been identified in over 110 countries and territories. As of this writing (early 2022) according to official figures (not always entirely reliable), infections were approaching 300 million and the death count 5.5 million and rising globally with daily updates available on the Internet from a variety of sources, notably from the Johns Hopkins University site (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html). These seem to be large numbers but, as many commentators point out, in terms of deaths per million of the population by country and the lack of certainty over exact causes of deaths, the impact of the pandemic on mortality rates could turn out to be relatively mild compared to normal seasonal pandemics; and many governments and commentators began to redirect their attention to the much discussed and rapidly increasing economic, social, psychological, and general non-COVID health impacts of the pandemic. In October 2021, the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change was released with the slogan: "code red for a healthy future" raising the alarm and making the links explicit between the coronavirus, more general health issues, and climate change (*Lancet* 2022).

At first, it was thought that mega-cities with high density populations were most at risk, with Wuhan, London, Milan, New York, São Paulo, and many others identified as hot spots for infections (Narain 2020). This detailed article concludes that the mortality rate per million population in India has actually been relatively low. At the time of this writing (January 2022) Delta and other variants, notably Omicron, add further layers of uncertainty. Research from China (Zhang and Hu 2020), India (Kumar and Abdin 2021) and the US (Souch et al. 2021) comparing the situations in rural and urban communities further complicates the story. In the US, (and probably elsewhere) compared with cities rural communities tend to be poorer, less healthy, less well-served with medical facilities, and more likely to be at risk from food processing plants (see Yearby 2021). However, paradoxically, when lockdown and protective measures (notably social distancing and face masks) are relaxed, obviously high density, entertainment-seeking, populations will be more at risk. Even the notoriously climate-change denying *The Wall Street Journal* (Putzier 2020) appears to have reconsidered with its article, "Why Covid-19 Makes It Harder for Cities to Fight Climate Change: Energy bills and carbon emissions rise as office buildings pull in more outside air to keep workers safe," a powerful pandemic image of the beleaguered city. In parallel with this, the rapid growth of working from home (usually via the Internet) is widely identified as the cause of the destruction of small businesses in city centers, turning them into ghost towns; pictures of deserted streets in the media being another powerful image of the beleaguered city.

Few governments around the world have covered themselves with glory in their handling of the epidemic. The architecture and design websites (i.e., https://www.dezeen.com/) tell us that work is already ongoing to re-design our homes for coping with future pandemics, making them healthier and more sustainable, though usually in a short-sighted optimistic socio-political vacuum, part of the "Build Back Better" narrative that assumes that what was largely responsible for the pandemic (capitalist globalization) can somehow miraculously solve it. This seems to parallel the situation regarding the moral implications of irresponsible climate change denial, which attracts attention in the scholarly literature, occasionally in the mass media, and often on social media. The over-optimistic claims of the prospects for 100 percent renewable energy (RE) are rarely challenged in the mainstream media despite warnings from inside energy science. For example,

> When serious critics examine high-profile models that claim to prove feasibility for transition to 100% RE over territories ranging from regional to global scale, they typically find that these exercises are informed by many uncertainties and contestable assumptions … It follows that 'real-world' inferences extrapolated from such research should be viewed as speculative at best and dangerously misleading at worst (Floyd et al. 2020:6).

Floyd's critique is strongly reinforced by a growing volume of research on the problematic concept of "net zero emissions," ever present in the COP 26 conference in Glasgow in 2021 (see Dale and Moss 2021; Dyke et al. 2021; Miltenberger and Potts 2021; Pearce 2021). An Internet search for "net zero carbon emissions" in 2021 brought up over 60 million items, including a relatively optimistic report from Barclays (2021) outlining a sensible path to total decarbonization: The bank's analysts tell us:

> But achieving that will not be easy. In order to cut emissions, the carbon intensity of the energy mix has to fall – which could mean increases in costs that are hard to bear. There are also risks that goals are thwarted by trade disputes, the slow adoption of new technologies, and a lack of political will. Governments, companies and consumers are committed to moving to a lower-carbon world. … But even after huge changes, there will be sectors and areas where net zero is just not possible – from the perspective of either technology or costs. Nearly 20 gigatonnes per year will be needed in CO2 removal, according to our analysts' estimates, through direct capture or other offsets such as nature-based solutions (Barclays 2021).

However, the Barclay's analysts do not follow up on this problem. Two Chinese scholars reinforce the argument that the path to Net Zero is anything but certain (Xu and Dai 2021). The outcome of COP 26 was highly controversial, with governments claiming modest breakthroughs and critics exposing widespread hypocrisy, summed up by Greta Thunberg's assessment: "Blah, Blah, Blah." It was noted that few corporate executives attended, but much was made of the

150 fossil fuel lobbyists who made their presence felt. The report on COP 26 by the independent climate change research organization CarbonBrief.org quotes an analyst as follows on net-zero [sic]:

> It is all very well for leaders and governments to claim that they have a net-zero target, but if they don't have plans as to how to get there, and their 2030 targets are not aligned with net-zero, then, frankly, these net-zero targets are just paying lip service to real climate action. That's the key reason we think Glasgow at this stage has a very big credibility gap (Liu 2021).

This is true, but the absence of any indication that net zero is itself problematic is just as important. An outstanding feature of the conference was the intervention of delegates from small "developing" countries, notably small island states with minimal greenhouse gas emissions already facing existential threats from climate change (for Australian media coverage of "sinking islands" see Sklair (2020:205–206)). The hypocrisy of governments and corporations on show at COP 26 can be illustrated in many ways, for example the historically climate-change denying ExxonMobil acts as an official adviser to the UK government on the path to Net Zero via Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage, another highly problematic strategy (Ahmed 2021). The UK government, like many others, continues to subsidize fossil-fuel business in a variety of ways; corporations drag their heels over stranded assets and continue to finance projects high in carbon emissions all over the world.

It is true that some of the promises made to decarbonize over recent years have been honored, but in the view of many scientists it is too little, too late. Welcome as they are, innovations in renewable energy production and use, where their proponents (for example the electric car industry) and their supporters in government and the media give the 'dangerously misleading' impression that we can continue to drive or fly as much as we like (business as usual). This raises the question: are we entering the realms of administrative evil? Legal scholars Benjamin (2017) and Rose et al. (2019) suggest in their complementary analyses of the complexities that arise when the Anthropocene enters the legal system, that questions of administrative evil and wider moral issues may need to be addressed sooner or later.

Similar arguments can be made in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. For example, Richard Horton (2020), the editor of The *Lancet*, in his book, *The COVID-19 Catastrophe: What's Gone Wrong and How to Stop It Happening Again*, condemns the governments of the UK and the US and most of the rest of the world for misleading their publics and even some scientists for allowing themselves to become the public relations wing of government. Complementing this analysis John Lanchester (2021) reviews five new books published in 2021 alone on government mishandling of the pandemic in the UK (also Keen (2021) on economists). When governments and business make the case that it is worth the risk to ease restrictions in order to minimize economic damage, are we again entering the realms of administrative evil?

Scholars and activists are beginning to make connections between coronavirus and the Anthropocene (Chin et al. 2020; Kothari et al. 2020; Morand and Walther 2020), but to most people there is no obvious connection with architecture and city planning. However, all over the world even cities with the most expensive housing and the most desirable enclaves have pockets (and sometimes more than pockets) of sub-standard, crowded dwellings, often peopled with immigrants (long-standing or recent), usually ethnic minorities. The pandemic has highlighted the apparently higher vulnerability to infection of these people, many of whom are frontline medical staff, and their mortality tends to be higher than average. When we start to think about the built environment in these terms, it is easier to see that in cities in almost every part of the world, architectural icons, unique and typical (from museums, airports, and luxury hotels to pubs, sports stadiums, entertainment venues, parks, and restaurants) become dangerous spaces. These cities, into which many millions have flocked in the Anthropocene era for a better life, have become beleaguered. What this means for architecture, iconic or not, is impossible to predict. Communities in coronavirus lockdown are faced with invisible external threats, while our home planet Earth is also increasingly beleaguered.

Distancing myself from my own work it occurs to me to ask, “If it is so terrible why do most people put up with capitalism?” There are many obvious answers to this question (jobs, the Ideological State Apparatus, junk food, alcohol, consumerism, convenience, and so on). Not so obvious is the confusing role of media and popular culture, which simultaneously exposes the bad behavior of capitalists, corporations, and their friends in governments and bureaucracies, while offering no viable alternatives. Christopher Bigsby (2013), a professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, in his study of TV drama in the US expands this argument in the context of ten HBO series (notably The Sopranos, The Wire, The West Wing, and Mad Men). Bigsby quotes David Simon, creator of The Wire from an interview at the Edinburgh TV Festival, “The Wire was a critique of unrestrained capitalism … It’s about what happens when maximizing profit is mistaken for the framework of a just society … I’m not a Marxist, I’m glad we have capitalism in the tool box to generate wealth” (cited in Bigsby 2013:250). Adding to the mixed messages, the ancient trope of the anti-hero becomes a powerful tool to blur the distinction between good and evil, between the moral and the immoral, in my view best expressed in the figure of Tony Soprano in The Sopranos (Olla 2021; van Ommen et al. 2016). Similarly, Frank and Claire Underwood in House of Cards, a series whose origins were in England, blurs this phenomenon, life imitating art as much as art imitating life. Ying Zhu (2014) provides a provocative China connection. In this respect where the US and England lead the rest of the world follows. The global media theorist Lee Artz (2015) expresses this very well, “The global culture of transnational capitalist media features two complementary yet distinct representations: hybrid content packaged in standardized forms and hegemonic themes” (p. 11) and Christian Fuchs (2019) provides a thorough analysis of Marxist and Humanist versions of communication theory via the ongoing base/superstructure problem. While Artz and Fuchs among others provide much food for thought on how the media and their products work to sustain capitalism they do not entirely answer my question: “if it is so terrible why do most people put up with capitalism?”

In 1999, Larry and Andy Wachowski released the extraordinary film The Matrix; two sequels followed, The Matrix Reloaded in 2003 and in 2004 The Matrix Revolutions, rapidly attracting a large cult following. In 2021, another sequel, The Matrix Resurrections, was released. Judging by the trailer the fourth film was even more ridiculous and violent than its predecessors. Matt Lawrence (2004), a philosopher in California, attempts to explain why and how the Matrix films are of philosophical and moral interest, though capitalism does not feature in his analysis. Although his book is not entirely convincing it left “a splinter in my mind” and called up the popular slogan of climate change and other progressive activists “systems change not climate change.” But, like in the Matrix, it is not clear what the “system” is and how to change it. For example, most people don’t know where their food comes from and what long lists of ingredients really mean; or who owns what; or who is responsible for what in the global capitalist system, or what Artificial Intelligence means for us in our everyday lives. One of the most important questions posed in academic philosophy and in The Matrix is “what is real?” Life seems much simpler if you don’t think about these questions. Mobilizing a social movement theory perspective, Beer (2020) presents some interesting evidence on the perceived complexity of the reality of capitalism from a survey of participants at what he labels “Mainstream U.S. Climate Change Protest Events,” revealing few clues about how to escape that particular matrix.

My conclusion is simple: We need to question the rationale for big cities, to challenge the contemporary hegemonic coupling of hyper-consumerism and hedonistic emancipation, on which the attraction of the city rests. This implies an exit from capitalism. Capitalism cannot be reformed; exit entails the abolition of money and socially necessary labor time. We also need to think more about the benefits of smaller-scale human settlements (Martínez-Alier 2003).

Sklair (2022: Chapter 11) offers an exercise in genuine realist utopianism based on transformation of mentalities, starting with parenting and degrowth – a very long-term project. To conclude on a slightly more positive note it occurs to me that one of the most important advances of the last few decades might be the slow but significant realization that environmental safeguarding should be considered a human right to be protected in International Law. Also encouraging is the recent campaign to create a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation treaty. "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" or "too little too late"?

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